

The logo for AC Education features two overlapping circles, one grey and one orange, with a smaller grey circle above them.

# **AC** Education

## **Understanding Anxiety and Helping Children and Young People Cope with Anxiety**

**A workbook for parents and carers**



## What is Anxiety?

It's a word we use a lot but how would you describe or define anxiety?  
Anxiety, which is a noun, is defined by the Oxford Learners Dictionaries as

**The state of feeling nervous or worried that something bad is going to happen**

That seems to sum it up quite accurately. It is a bit different from stress which can be feeling there is too much to do or feeling particularly threatened, but there are certainly a lot of similarities.

The word 'worry', a verb or doing word, is defined as:

**Thinking about unpleasant things that might happen or about problems that you have**

Lots of similarities between anxiety and worry. Both can cause a lot of distress BUT can often not do anything to change the situation or outcome.

So, the word anxiety describes the state, the word worry describes the action or act.

## The Current Context

We are in the middle of a global crisis so it is no surprise that adults and children feel anxious. For those who may struggle with anxiety anyway it might be especially difficult and lots of people who don't usually find anxiety problem, are feeling anxious at the moment.

There are a few things that make the current situation particularly challenging

- ❖ The situation is constantly changing
- ❖ It is totally out of our control
- ❖ It is unpredictable
- ❖ There is no sense of timescale
- ❖ We can't access usual support

This is true for us as adults and of course it is true for children too.

Sometimes children are anxious when adults around them are very calm BUT they are much more likely to be anxious when they sense or pick up that the adults around them are anxious – after all it is adults that keep children safe so they often feel scared if they sense adults are worried.

If you are a parent or an adult caring for children then it is really important to take care of yourself and try to stay calm, find another adult you can share worries with (even over the phone) as much as you can. You are human too and if you find you've been 'sharing' your worry then make a point of also sharing how you calm yourself.

But don't beat yourself up you are human and doing the best you can in difficult times.

## What we worry about

Use the box below to note down what worries you most at the moment, then use the additional box to note down WHAT YOU THINK might cause the greatest anxiety for your child/young person.

My greatest worry at the moment is

I think my child(ren)/teenager will be most anxious about

**Remember anxiety is normal and can be beneficial in that it prepares for danger or difficulty ahead BUT if it starts to interfere with our usual functioning and stops us enjoying life it is becoming a problem and there is a lot we can do to help ourselves stay calm or restore calm when we start to panic.**

Use the box below to make a note of what you usually feel when you are anxious

When I am anxious I feel

## Anxiety in Children

Depending on the age and developmental stage of children they may find it very hard to talk about emotions or how they are feeling but their behaviour will often tell us.

### Signs

- Restless and unable to concentrate or focus
- Upset or tearful without apparent cause
- Defiant and may refuse to follow even reasonable requests
- Snappy or irritable
- Avoid certain tasks or situations
- Lack interest in things they usually like
- Display angry outbursts over things that seem trivial
- Become aggressive with little provocation
- Be very clingy and need lots of reassurance
- Ask lots of questions or want to be constantly reminded of plans
- If old enough they may want to make plans or appear bossy

### Symptoms

They may also experience physical symptoms like

- Loss of appetite OR wanting to eat more than usual (this can also be because of boredom)
- Difficulty in falling asleep – or waking in the night
- Generally apathetic or ‘tired’ all the time
- Headaches, tummy aches, or general aches and pains.

Many children and young people are finding themselves in a new situation, separated from friends and their usual routines.

Take a moment to think about how the children and young people you care for have been behaving. Have you noticed anything different that might be due to anxiety?

## Helping a child in 'melt down'

If the anxiety a child is feeling is fairly extreme, they may be very tearful or withdrawn, refusing to do anything or having something that looks like a tantrum, being angry and aggressive. Remember that anxiety often has its root in fear – that something bad is going to happen. When we are afraid, we sometimes react because our survival instinct is activated a bit – flight, flight or freeze.

### Calming your child

**Be Calm** especially if they are angry/shouting

**Be Close** physically close in an age appropriate way

The child or young person may not want this at first but be as close as possible without worsening the situation, unless the child wants to distance for a short time. Be in the same room even if some distance apart. If it's a teenager and they don't want you in their room for example, try saying you'll come in but stay near the door.

**Be Connected** try to have eye contact even if saying nothing

**Be Reassuring** explain that you can see it's tough for them but that you will help – if you know specifically what they are worrying about you could reassure them about that

**Be Present** – give them your complete attention and suggest that you try to breathe together to help them calm or perhaps both listen to something calming

**Be a Listener** – they may be able to tell you what they are thinking or worrying about – listen even if their worries seem 'small' to you.

As the adult you set the emotional tone, the aim is for you to share your calm not get caught up in their anxiety.

If the child/young person is not able to articulate what they feel, as they get calmer you could 'wonder aloud' – "I think maybe you are worried about ....." "I think you are upset because....."

When they have calmed then try to do something to have some fun/enjoyment together.

Make a plan together to fit in some more regular calming activities so they develop ways of coping with their anxiety.

## Activities to help a child deal with anxiety

In general terms it is worth establishing a routine – we all tend to feel ‘safe’ when we know what things will be happening when. But don’t be afraid to then add in a bit of flexibility, allow yourself to be guided by the child. If they are enjoying something and want to continue then use judgement as to whether that would be helpful or not – we are all in a strange situation so a bit of ‘slack’ can be helpful. Try to fit some of the ideas below in each day – even if your child isn’t anxious BUT also use them when you detect signs that they may be worrying.

**Get control of breathing** — breathe with you if necessary, holding hands with you taking the lead. Try to have a daily practice of calm breathing, mindfulness or grounding exercises like 5,4,3,2,1 – 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste.

**Try to get them talking about their feelings** – often easiest while engaged in another activity, walking or drawing for example.

**Do something to distract them** — simply moving to another room, getting a drink or snack, starting a new activity together, watching TV, reading a story – anything to fill their mind with something other than the anxiety.

**Connect with someone** – depending on their age get them to maybe call a relative or one of their friends or connect with a friend in a game.

**Help them reframe their thoughts** – you can almost make this a game (but don’t minimise their worries) try to turn negative thoughts into positive ones – if they say they are worried about not seeing their friends remind them, or teach them, how they can stay in touch with friends in other ways.

**Get Creative** — creativity helps us all feel calmer so build creative activities into your daily routine, painting, drawing, gardening, baking, sewing or anything else that springs to mind.

**Go outdoors** — this may be restricted but if it isn’t then a walk outdoors or just going into the garden can be really good.

**Exercise** — being active is good in all sorts of ways but it definitely helps with anxiety – so even a few exercises in the lounge will help.

**Encourage Gratitude** — shifting our focus can help our anxiety and one way to do that is by consciously thinking of things we are grateful for the video below is designed for a class but you can adapt it for home <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TYvJh5Cwww>

We hope you have found this helpful and remember that anxiety is normal and that it is okay not to be okay.

Concentrate on building some calming strategies into the daily routine for children and give them time to get used to this new situation.

